

# JUNIOR CYCLE EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF STUDENTS

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There is considerable debate at the moment about the nature of junior cycle education in Ireland. Much information relevant to this debate has been obtained from a study which tracked the progress of students through second-level education. This on-going longitudinal study yields many significant insights into the processes shaping student experiences of the educational system. A cohort of 900 students in 12 case-study schools has been surveyed and interviewed since their entry to first year. The schools included in the study were selected to capture key dimensions of variation in school organisation, namely, the approach to subject choice, the approach to ability grouping, and the kinds of personal and social support structures put in place for students. This study, the first of its kind in Ireland, provides significant insights into the processes shaping student experiences and outcomes. Three books\*\* have been published to date presenting findings on junior cycle experiences.

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## The Transition to Second-level Education

Moving into second-level education evokes contradictory emotions among students; they are excited about going to a new school but nervous about what lies ahead of them. The primary and second-level sectors are distinctive in their organisation and structure, requiring students to adapt to a very different setting on making the transition. Students in first year have several teachers rather than one, and, in many cases, are moving to a larger school with a longer school day. Their relations with their teachers and peers are also different; having more teachers often means a more formal relationship with school staff and many students are required to build new friendship networks.

Moving from primary to second-level schooling means encountering a new curriculum. Students take more subjects, typically 13-14, in first year than they had in primary school and are exposed to new knowledge domains. Students are generally positive about the new subjects they take in junior cycle, particularly subjects with a more practical basis, such as Art, Materials Technology (Wood) and Physical Education. However, where they study the same subjects as in primary school (Irish, English and Maths, for example),

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many students report discontinuity in the standard taught or in the teaching approach used.

Schools handle the transition process in different ways. Almost all schools have an open day prior to students arriving and/or an induction day to familiarise first year students with the rules and practices of the new school. In the majority of cases, a class tutor has responsibility for an in-coming class and helps students to adjust to the new school setting. Around half of all second-level schools have student mentors, where older students take responsibility for looking after a small group of first year students.

In spite of facing a very different school setting, most students adapt quickly to their new school. However, a minority of students – about one in six – take longer to settle in. To some extent, this process reflects the background characteristics of students – girls report taking longer to settle in than boys, newcomer (immigrant) and Traveller students take longer to adapt, and students who were already disaffected by their primary experiences have greater adjustment difficulties. However, the way in which the transition process is managed by the school significantly affects the ease of transition. Students settle in if they have more realistic expectations about what second-level school will be like; this can be facilitated through formal visits to the school beforehand or informally through information provided by siblings and friends. Formal student integration programmes help students to settle in, but only if they are underpinned by a positive school climate, that is, by positive interaction between teachers and students, and among students themselves. Many students express reluctance to approach teachers about personal problems such as bullying; student mentors, therefore, provide a way of addressing student problems and are generally seen favourably by first year students. Continuity in curriculum also facilitates student integration into the new school as does access to subjects with a more practical orientation.

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## Second Year Experiences

The junior cycle is a three-year programme which is formally assessed largely on the basis of written exams at the end of third year. After the settling-in period of first year, second year is often characterised by teachers as one of ‘drift’ on the part of students. Without the focus of an examination, they are seen as becoming more disengaged and ‘difficult’ than previously. However, our research indicates that second year is actually a key period in students’ longer-term engagement with schooling. First year involves a certain degree of turbulence for all students as they adjust to the new school setting. By second year, however, two distinct groups of students are evident. The first group is more highly engaged in schoolwork, they find schoolwork challenging but invest more time in homework and study than they did in first year. This group is disproportionately made up of female students, those from middle-class (professional) backgrounds, and those in mixed ability or higher stream base classes. In contrast, the second group of students is drifting or even actively disengaging from schoolwork and is investing less time in homework/study than previously. This group is disproportionately made up of male students, those from working-class backgrounds and those allocated to lower stream classes. This differentiation has a longer term impact on student achievement in third year.

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## Third Year Experiences

The presence of the Junior Certificate examination is found to set the tone for student experiences in a number of ways: the teaching methods used, the amount of work assigned to students and teacher expectations, the use of private tuition ('grinds'), and student perceptions of school climate. Students in the study were asked about the kinds of teaching approaches which they felt facilitated their learning. Third year students generally prefer techniques that allow them to have more autonomy in the learning process whereas a strictly teacher-led approach is considered less helpful. Students highlight the importance of interaction in class whereby everybody can contribute and discussions are encouraged. However, both students and teachers report that third year represents a move away from 'fun' activities (such as group work, quizzes and projects), a 'need to knuckle down to the books', and a greater emphasis on monitoring student behaviour in class.

The majority of students report increased demands in terms of schoolwork and homework in third year compared with earlier years. In particular, students' time investment in homework and study increases significantly between second and third year. Many students have spoken of increasing 'pressure' in third year and of difficulties in juggling the demands of homework and revision. In some cases, especially among some groups of girls, this pressure is seen as a significant source of stress. In an effort to assist them with their studies, a significant minority (a quarter) of third year students take private tuition ('grinds') outside school.

In tandem with the changes in teaching and learning, interaction between teachers and students appears to change in nature over the course of junior cycle, with positive interaction in the form of praise or positive feedback becoming less prevalent and negative interaction in the form of being reprimanded by teachers becoming increasingly prevalent. There is an overall decline in the extent to which students are positive about school and their teachers as they move through junior cycle, reflecting, at least in part, the changing school climate.

Each Junior Certificate subject can be taken at one of three levels: higher, ordinary and (for English, Irish and Maths) foundation. Six of the twelve case-study schools used streaming, allocating students to their base classes according to their assessed ability in first year. Streaming practices are found to have a significant impact on student experiences. Students allocated to lower stream classes are much more likely to disengage from school, and many report feeling insufficiently challenged by schoolwork. In streamed schools, the subject level taken is generally linked to the base class attended, with lower stream classes usually allocated to ordinary or foundation levels. As a result, students in lower stream classes take an average of one subject at higher level compared with almost six for those in higher stream classes and almost seven for those in mixed ability base classes. In schools with mixed ability base classes, choice of subject level is usually the result of a negotiation process between teacher and student, although the way this process operates varies across schools and teachers. Overall, the case-study schools vary markedly in the take-up of higher level subjects, even controlling for students' initial academic ability; this reflects differences in school policy (for example, regarding the use of streaming) but also the interaction between teacher and student expectations. The choice of subject levels is important because of its

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## **The Junior Certificate Examination**

consequences for achievement in the Junior Certificate examination as well as for access to higher level subjects at senior cycle.

The study provides important evidence on the factors which influence student performance in the Junior Certificate examination. Students come to second-level education with very different performance levels in reading and maths. As might be expected, reading and maths test scores at the beginning of first year are strongly predictive of exam performance three years later. However, there is significant variation across schools in student academic outcomes, controlling for initial performance. Thus, school and classroom process can make a crucial difference to how students fare academically.

Ability grouping is strongly predictive of examination performance, with students in lower stream classes achieving 2.5 grade points (out of a maximum of 10) per subject less than students of similar ability levels attending mixed ability base classes. This reflects the ceiling on achievement set by the lack of access to higher level subjects among lower stream students. More crucially, it is also indicative of lower teacher and student expectations within lower stream classes.

Aspects of school climate are found to have a crucial impact on academic outcomes. Some students, especially working-class boys, get caught up in a cycle of 'acting up' and 'being given out to' by teachers, especially from second year onwards. Students appear to become disaffected if they feel that the rules of the school, and their treatment by teachers, are unfair or arbitrary. Even more academically engaged students feel little sense of ownership over the school rules as currently formulated. Student misbehaviour and negative teacher-student interaction are associated with significantly lower Junior Certificate examination grades.

Second year experiences emerge as crucial in other respects. Many students take time to come to terms with the demands of schoolwork after making the transition to second-level education; however, students who still report having difficulties with schoolwork in second year tend to underperform subsequently. Given the nature of the Junior Certificate examination, it is not surprising that time spent on homework and study in third year pays off in terms of examination results. Longer term engagement has an additional impact, however, since students who were drifting or disengaging in second year receive lower examination grades. Life outside school also influences academic outcomes since students who work part-time during term-time and those who have a very active social life tend to achieve lower examination grades than other students, all else being equal.

The research team is continuing to analyse findings from the longitudinal study to explore the transition to senior cycle and the prelude to the Leaving Certificate examination. Junior cycle experiences are found to influence the types of opportunities and pathways open to students at senior cycle, which are in turn likely to influence examination outcomes and post-school pathways. Emerging findings highlight the crucial role of experiences at junior cycle for young people's later engagement with learning.

Findings from the longitudinal study raise a number of issues for policy development regarding junior cycle education. It is evident that the presence of the Junior Certificate exam influences the nature of teaching and learning, especially in third year, with the focus narrowing to one of preparation for the exam. This finding is very much in keeping with research on high stakes testing internationally, since both students and teachers will respond to the presence of such tests. The use of different forms of assessment might have the potential to change the focus of teaching and learning to one which better facilitates student engagement. However, it is clear that assessment is not the only issue. In spite of a relatively centralised second-level system in Ireland, schools have a certain degree of discretion over key aspects of organisation and process. The findings indicate that schools can make a positive difference to student engagement and performance in a number of ways – by adopting a more flexible approach to ability grouping and promoting the take-up of higher level subjects, by using diverse teaching methods to actively engage students in learning, by focusing on positive behaviour rather than negative sanction in responding to pupil misbehaviour, and by promoting a positive climate with good relations between teachers and students. The study highlights the importance of supporting schools to better facilitate student engagement in learning.

\*\* This study has been funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the Department of Education and Science. Findings have been published in:

- SMYTH, E., S. MCCOY, M. DARMODY, 2004. [\*Moving Up\*](#), Dublin: Liffey Press and ESRI.
- SMYTH, E., A. DUNNE, S. MCCOY, M. DARMODY, 2006. [\*Pathways through the Junior Cycle\*](#), Dublin: Liffey Press and ESRI.
- SMYTH, E., A. DUNNE, M. DARMODY, S. MCCOY, 2007. [\*Gearing up for the Exam?\*](#) Dublin: Liffey Press and ESRI.